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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Wednesday, September 11, 1935

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "BOOKS BY FARM PEOPLE." Information from Miss Caroline Sherman, Bureau of Agricultural Economics. Approved by the Extension Office, United States Department of Agriculture.

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Let's take today off from the practical matters of life and talk about books. You know, when the evenings get longer and the weather chillier, then is a good time to start thinking about books for the family to enjoy in the winter.

The other day I heard a talk about books that interested me very much. The person who gave the talk was Caroline Sherman of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics in Washington. Miss Sherman tells me she has a special hobby in the reading line. Her hobby is books by and about farm people. She says: "Books written about farm people are numerous enough to fill a library, but what of books by farm people?"

And then she answers: "If we mean books actually written by farm people when actively engaged in farm work, they are naturally rather few in number. For how many of those who make their living on farms have time for the sustained writing that is necessary for the making of a book? Still less do they have spare energy and freedom to do creative work. But we do sometimes find books written by such people -- for instance, Evelyn Harris' spirited volume, The Barter Lady. In this book Mrs. Harris tells of the schemes she has worked out, while running her Maryland farm, to exchange surplus farm products for services and things which even self-sufficing farm families do find necessary."

There's a book to remember for your winter reading -- if you're interested in how a clever farm woman can make an extra income by the old-time barter method.

"The second farm author that Miss Sherman has on her list is Ruth Suckow. She says: "Ruth Suckow though now in Washington where her husband is helping agriculture through the Triple A, began writing her books while still on her Iowa bee farm. The characters in her Country People were true to the title, though her later books like the recent one called The Folks, deal with village people or with the farm family after it has scattered over the country."

The last Pulitzer Prize winner is a young woman named Josephine Johnson. Her prize-winning book is Now in November, "a tragically beautiful story in a Missouri farm setting," Miss Sherman calls it. She says Miss Johnson wrote this book from the farm where she has lived most of the time since the age of twelve."

So much for books written on the farm. Now about a few written by people after they have left the farm, when, says Miss Sherman, they find more leisure and perspective. Margaret Wilson who wrote that earlier Pulitzer Prize winner of Iowa farm life, The Able McLaughlins, grew up as one of a hard-working farm family. They had practically no cash or outside labor. Her uncle was the Honorable James Wilson, you know -- the dirt-farmer who was Secretary of Agriculture when many of us can first remember.

"Willa Cather is the classic fictional writer of the American farm and its influence on those who are born there. She lived on a Nebraska ranch from the time she was eight years old to maturity. You remember some of her books -- O Pioneers, Song of the Lark, My Antonia, One of Ours. And her new book, just out, Lucy Gayheart, has a village background.

"Gladys Carroll, whose As the Earth Turns delighted us a year or two ago, and who has now written A Few Foolish Ones, lived her first 12 years on her grandfather's farm in Maine, and she frequently returns to it.

"Then we have those telling books written by people of other walks of life who finally have actual farm experiences. An Abandoned Orchard is Eleanor Risley's vivacious and humorous (but thoroughly in-earnest) story of her day-to-day adventures in bringing back an old orchard in the Ozarks, inherited from an uncle.

"We Sagebrush Folks was written by Annie Pike Greenwood both while she and her husband were trying to make a living from their new Idaho ranch, and after they had lost it and retreated to Salt Lake City." She tells Miss Sherman that she has the makings of 6 other books waiting for polishing, and all apparently relate to her experiences in Idaho.

To quote Miss Sherman again:

"It is interesting that in a few instances some of our best fiction about farm people has been written by authors who have never lived on a farm. Edna Ferber's journalistic ability to dig quickly and effectively into a subject made her So Big and American Beauty -- built on the so-different farming of Illinois and old New England. Ellen Glasgow's deep perception, comprehension of character, and real artistry, made possible her rich story, growing out of the rebuilding of a Virginia farm, called Barren Ground.

"Perhaps the author to mention as our last is the one who was probably our first to turn the attention of incredulous American writers and readers to the mere possibility of using farm material successfully in fiction -- Hamlin Garland. Through his Main Traveled Roads he first brought farm life into fiction. Later came his series: Trail Makers of the Middle Border, A Son of the Middle Border, A Daughter of the Middle Border, and Back Trailers from the Middle Border. In this series, you know, he tells the whole story of his pioneer family. They went out from New England to the Middle West to find freedom and space for adventurous living; lived there a generation or two; and then migrated back to the East where he and his children felt they could better develop the talents that were in them."

That concludes Miss Sherman's talk of books you might want to remember for your fall and winter reading. She says about books by farm people: "Usually there is in them something that warms the heart and cools the brain, and that can rarely be said of our modern fiction."

